

**WATER: THE HYDRAULIC
PARAMETER OF CONFLICT IN
THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH
AFRICA**

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FOREWORD

We are pleased to publish this thirtieth-fifth volume in the *Occasional Paper* series of the US Air Force Institute for National Security Studies (INSS). Steve Kiser has produced a significant study behind today's headlines, explaining in detail how environmental factors underlie many real and potential conflicts. Environmental security is one of several "new" dimensions of the contemporary international scene, and it is one that requires much greater examination. This paper deepens our understanding of its dynamic interplay with more traditional security factors in two important cases.

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JAMES M. SMITH
Director

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Water is a primary concern of most governments in the Middle East and North Africa. A myriad of synergistic variables are exponentially increasing demands for water, while simultaneously decreasing the region's ability to supply it. These variables include a rapidly increasing population, a large per capita increase in water demand, increasing water pollution, rapid economic growth, persistent regional drought, and irrecoverable water overexploitation. Compounding the issue are regional tensions (such as those between Israel and the Palestinian Authority and Egypt and Sudan), vague international water laws, and a history of regional conflict.

A gloomy prediction emerges if one extrapolates the trends in each of these variables. Especially in the Middle East, water supplies are so tight that even the most optimistic forecast suggests the water issue will be "super-critical" within a decade. Indeed, water issues surround the current peace process, and may actually be worsened should a successful treaty be negotiated between Israel and the Palestinian Authority.

This paper examines these variables in depth, and then forecasts a series of possible events that could be the catalyst for a water-based conflict in the Middle East. These events include mass Palestinian migration to a newly declared Palestinian state, transferring control of the West Bank aquifer to the Palestinian Authority, loss of Israeli control of the Jordan River headwaters (which would necessarily result from returning the Golan Heights to Syria), continued or exacerbated drought, and an Israeli return to a more hawkish government.

While currently water should only be considered a proximately source of conflict in the region, in the future, water could very well become the primary reason governments decide to go to war.